



The PROJECT MANAGER'S Tool Kit

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by W. Scott Cameron

PROJECT MANAGERS ARE RARELY DESCRIBED AS BEING funny. Moreover, a good sense of humor rarely seems to be one of the deciding factors in choosing someone to be a project manager, or something that pops up as a major discussion point at an annual performance review. Perhaps this is because people think you aren't serious about your work if you laugh. I disagree with this assessment, but that's not really my point. As I talk to people either pursuing a career in project management, or broadening their assignment to include project management, I encourage them to consider what tools they need to be successful. I suggest that they consider any strength they have to be part of their Project Management (PM) Tool Kit, and being funny could be one of the tools they need.

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On one project earlier in my career, my being considered funny by my boss was the main reason I was asked to be the project manager of a unique project, or as some called it, an "opportunity."

The scope of the work entailed:

- Produce a 15-20 minute video presentation, which would take a "biting, irreverent, humorous" look at all facets of our organization
- Insure we met our budget constraints
- Complete the project within 5 weeks
- Use any resources available

The project sponsor indicated this presentation was going to be shown to all the company's executives just prior to a closing speech by our chief executive officer at an upcoming meeting. I would introduce it.

The challenge seemed to me to be how to approach this task. The answer was fairly straightforward when

I looked inside my PM Tool Kit and chose the “tools” I felt I needed to execute this project:

- Proposal writing with defined success criteria
- Cost management
- Schedule preparation
- Staffing plan
- Risk reduction plan
- Sense of humor

I wrote a proposal reiterating what I had heard the sponsor state as his requirements, and began defining the scope of the presentation. I also hired a contractor to assist in writing and producing the video. Since the schedule’s end point was set, the main schedule activity was scheduling intermediate reviews.

I reviewed the proposal with the sponsor and

allow sufficient time for refining my humor and changing the course of action, if required. We prepared drafts of 15-20 “skits” and reviewed them with the sponsor. He liked a few of the concepts but felt they were not “biting” enough. I also indicated I was not getting much “biting” inspiration from the people I had discussed the project with so far. He then personally asked two of the more outspoken members of his leadership team to offer their thoughts about potential concepts. We took their input and prepared another 10-15 draft “skits.” The next review resulted in a green light to move forward and produce the video.

The moment of truth came the day before the event when we reviewed the final production. He laughed, I still had a job, and then I laughed. Project accom-

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obtained his agreement. At that point, I set out to execute the project. This is when I encountered my first obstacle. No one else within the company wanted to work on this project with me. In fact, most people told me I was crazy to take on such an assignment. They indicated that if I were successful, however, they would be more than happy to say they had helped. I felt like I was living the children’s story of the Little Red Hen: Everyone declined to help make the bread but everyone was willing to eat it. My reaction was one of amazement and the stark realization that this project would be executed with only the contractor and me. I would see if being funny was really a moniker I deserved.

I now finalized the project’s two success criteria:

- The sponsor laughed when he saw the video
- I still had a job at the end of the project

My risk reduction plan called for early testing to

plished. Success criteria met. By evaluating, deciding on, and using specific tools in my PM Tool Kit, which I have collected throughout my career, I was able to tackle what I considered a very high-risk project and meet my/its success criteria.

Humor was an important tool on this project. The use of it on this project showed how important it is to use the right tools. The important thing to remember is everything the project manager has at his/her disposal belongs in their tool kit. If they don’t have the necessary tool, they need to either borrow one or go buy a new tool. There are conventional tools all project managers must learn to wield (proposal writing, cost estimating, schedule planning, etc.) as well as specialized tools like a sense of humor. If we know how to use them adroitly, we can consistently bring these to bear on our projects and be successful no matter what the project criteria or scope. •